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ABSTRACT

Good translation requires writing skills in each of its three stages: decoding the original text; transferring its cultural and linguistic element into the context of the target language; and encoding the information in that context. During decoding, the translator must be conscious of speech level, word usage, cultural references, syntactic devices used for stylistic effect, connotation as well as denotation, and writing skills. The second stage of translation requires making cultural and linguistic elements recognizable in both linguistic communities. Often, this requires some research, and may mean inserting footnotes for clarification. In the third stage, encoding text into the new language and context, writing skills are most clearly needed to make both style and context of the target language text faithful to the original. Translation from Spanish to English is seen to involve major structural changes at times, to reconcile differences in grammatical and stylistic patterns of the languages; for example, longer Spanish sentences may have to be broken into more, shorter sentences in English, without losing the relationships between elements in the sentences. It is further suggested that the best possible results occur when the translator has writing skills equal to the original author. A handout for this paper is written in Spanish and English. (Contains 10 references.) (MSE)

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How Can You Translate if You Can't Express Yourself in Writing?

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ED 375 622

The translation process, for both literary and non-literary texts, can be divided into three stages: decoding the original text, transferring its cultural and linguistic elements into the context of the target language, and encoding the information in that context (Herman 1). While it is obvious that encoding requires writing ability--and just how much is something that will be discussed later--it takes a good writer to successfully handle the two previous stages of the translation process as well.

The first stage--decoding--requires a careful, detailed, analytical reading of the original. The translator must be conscious of speech level, word usage, cultural references, syntactic devices used for stylistic effect, and connotation as well as denotation. All of these elements will need to be reflected somehow in a successful translation of the original. As the editors of The Craft of Translation note, "All acts of translation begin with a thorough investigation of the reading process. Translators, by necessity, read each word and sentence at least as carefully as the critic or the scholar. Even the smallest detail in a text . . . cannot be neglected" (Biguenet ix).

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How can a prospective translator be trained to do such a close, analytical reading of a text, conscious of the role of connotation, word choice, speech level, syntactic devices, and cultural context? Who are the people whose role it is to put

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these elements into collective play in written communication? They are writers. It would stand to reason, then, that the best way to prepare someone to be an effective decoder is to train that person as a writer--in the native language. After all, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, writing is writing is writing.

If you can write well in one language, you can write well in any language in which you know how to write. I have seen the truth of that statement semester after semester in the students in my Spanish Advanced Composition class. The focus of the course is getting the students to be able to express themselves well in writing in Spanish--a foreign language. As the semester goes on, they find themselves progressively less afraid of essay exams in other courses--in their native English. The writing skills they pick up in Spanish unconsciously generalize into their writing in English.

A good writer is one who manipulates language to achieve an effect. That, then, is someone who will recognize the same manipulation in the writing of others, and who will therefore be able to do the kind of close reading of a text that a translator needs to do. Deborah Herman, in her M.A. thesis, "Un modelo del proceso de traducción: Estudio preliminar," studies the three stages of translation, and she finds that the ability to write well in one's own language is essential for a translator, in part because there is an intimate relationship between the writing skill and the ability to analyze, or decode (Herman 3). Research on writing, too, confirms that fact. According to "Writing as a Mode of Learning" by Janet Emig, " . . . higher cognitive

functions, such as analysis and synthesis, seem to develop most fully only with the support system of verbal language--particularly, it seems, of written language" (122, qtd. in Herman 3-4). The first stage of translation, then, close reading and decoding the original text, requires the abilities of a good writer.

The second stage--one which often requires some research as well--, transference of cultural and linguistic elements of the original text into the new language context, cannot occur if the translator does not recognize those elements--and they have to be recognizable within both linguistic communities for the transfer to be successful. Sometimes a simple change in terms of reference is sufficient. For example, while the denotation of the Spanish saying, "En boca cerrada no entra mosca," is faithfully translated by the English saying, "Silence is golden," the spirit of the original is much more accurately rendered as, "Even a fish wouldn't get in trouble if it kept its mouth shut." On occasions a short parenthetical explanation can be inserted in the text, and other cases--depending on the nature of the text--can require translator's notes. The last option is illustrated in example 1 on the handout.

While both the Siete Partidas and the Fuero Real are part of the generally-known national history of the original audience--Spaniards--, we cannot suppose that an American reading public would understand either of those references. In this particular case, the translation of a book which already contains several footnotes, two additional translator's notes are perfectly

appropriate, and they can give the reader more information than would a parenthetical insertion in the text.

Writing ability is surely required for phase three of the translation process: encoding the material of the original into the new language--and into the new linguistic and cultural context, if the product is to be successful among the new target audience. The goal of translation is to communicate the semantic and contextual sense of the original, but in the style of the new language (Herman vi). Slavish devotion to the words of the original will not achieve this goal; it will lead, rather, to literal translation. Literal translations are seldom, if ever, satisfactory. According to the editors of The Craft of Translation:

> Literal translation deals with the surface appearance of words without a reflection of the directions of meaning that the original author tried to materialize behind that surface. The reader of such a translation will be confused and will experience great difficulties in visualizing the situations of the original text and its relationships to subsequent expansions of such situations (Biguenet xi).

Although it may be the line of least resistance, "The worst mistake a translator can commit is to reassure himself by saying, 'that's what it says in the original,' and renouncing the struggle to do his best. The words of the original are only the starting point; a translator must do more than convey information . . ." (Weaver 117). In being too concerned about the meanings of individual words, a translator may completely overlook other

elements present in the original. See excerpt 4 in the handout for one case of a translator's excessive concern with words.

First, the change from hacienda in Spanish to income in English indicates that the translator has missed some of what Cervantes is saying in the first paragraph of Don Quixote, and so the entire dimension of irony is lost in the English translation. It is consequently no surprise to find completely absent any indication of the word-play in dealing with the ages of Don Quixote's housekeeper and niece, the first of whom had already passed forty while the second had not yet arrived at twenty.

Humor is to be found at all levels in the original novel, from the most concrete physical humor to the most subtle irony. The Spanish reader recognizes the irony from the novel's opening paragraph, and is thus prepared to find it throughout this long work. The English reader, however, is only being prepared to find the physical, slapstick humor in that text.

Going from Spanish to English can involve major structural changes. Spanish conjunctions can indicate gender and number, so it is not at all uncommon to find multi-clause sentences in Spanish. English, however, tends to use shorter sentences, perhaps because its conjunctions do not specify gender or number, and so leave their antecedents in doubt when there could be more than one. People who are not good writers are generally unconscious of the lack of clarity in multi- clause sentences and will tend to leave the translation in the same structures as the original. But that, too, leads to literal translation, the problems of which we have already seen.

The fact that long Spanish sentences need to be broken into shorter sentences in English for clarity may break the relationship between juxtaposed elements. How can that relationship be reflected in English? It takes the ability to express one's own ideas clearly in writing in order to be able to do the same with another person's ideas. Excerpt 2 in the handout illustrates the transformation of an initial long sentence into three shorter sentences in English. However, the last of those sentences changes "la vida de éstas" into "Community life," to avoid the problem of unclear antecedent (which is not the case in Spanish, where the conjunction clearly refers to a preceding feminine plural noun).

Merely maintaining the author's emphases often requires structural changes. In Spanish, for example, emphasis is on the first elements of a sentence (Gili Gaya §70), while the principle of 'end-focus' rules in English (Herman 34). The beginning of excerpt 3 in the handout demonstrates this stylistic difference. Emphasis here is on the power of the family, so the Spanish original begins with, "Del poder de esta familia." To retain that emphasis in English, the word 'power' comes at the end of the phrase: "To illustrate this family's power." Compare that with a more literal possible rendering: "The power of this family can be illustrated by . . ." In that version, the word 'power' barely registers in the reader's mind.

A member of the faculty of Brussels' school for translators and interpreters declares that a successful translation uses all possible devices to reproduce the message in the best possible

manner (Dethier-Ronge 110). Ms. Herman's thesis affirms that the goal of translation is to produce in the second language a text which is not only semantically correct, but which reads so well in the new language that it does not seem to be a translation (Herman 23). Is it not, in fact, the highest praise to say that a translation does not read like a translation? Let me quote a section of a reader's evaluation of a translation for publication to illustrate this point.

> The translation is exceptional in its faithfulness to the original text, its lexical and idiomatic accuracy and precision, and its correctness of semantic interpretation. I am amazed at the skill that [the translator] has shown in producing an English text that reads so smoothly that the reader does not sense it is a translation from a Spanish original.

How will translations exhibit the characteristics we want to find in them if they are done by people whose writing ability is only marginal to fair? The translators in those cases will likely be unable to decode the original sufficiently to transfer the material to the target cultural and linguistic context, and will certainly be unable to transmit any subtleties of expression found in the original.

The initial reading by the translator is crucial. "Reading transforms the text, and in transplanting the text into the environment of a new language, the translator continues that process of transformation. Without transformation there is no translation . . ." (Biguenet x).

As an example of the need to decode appropriately, transfer elements to the target language, and then encode the results, let me use the title of an editorial article in the December 2, 1991, issue of Newsweek (12). Written by Stephen Sherrill, a freelance writer, the article deals with the shock of relatively recent college graduates upon suddenly finding themselves unemployed, and with no immediate prospects for new equivalent employment. It is entitled "Out of College, Out of Work." In decoding this title, one must realize out not only the conversational speech register, but also the parallelism of "out of + noun, out of + noun." At the same time, the translator must be aware of the play on words; the expression "out of," followed by college, implies having completed college and possessing a college degree. "Out of work" implies having had a job and then losing it. The two uses of "out of" are connotationally different from one another. There is no single expression in Spanish which allows both of those interpretations, so the translator will have to resort to some other device. Perhaps the word-play will need to be sacrificed for parallelism of structure, as in "Egresado de la universidad, despedido del trabajo," or perhaps a word-play can be retained in a version such as "Terminada la carrera, terminado el empleo." Which one will best serve the purpose depends on the content and tone of the article. That is an area in which the translator's powers of linguistic analysis and stylistic criticism --that is to say, the translator's abilities as a writer--come into play.

Translation is much more than a mechanical process. As one translator-trainer notes, if translation is a science, it is also

an art which makes demands on the craftsman's personality and the subtleties inherent in his/her knowledge of both the original and target languages (Dethier-Ronge 110).

The best possible results are achieved when the translator possesses writing skills equal to those of the original author (Herman 1), for that is when the translator is best able to execute all three stages of the translation process most effectively. Can we expect that sort of result if the translator cannot write well? If the translator is not a skilled writer, there will be lacks in the decoding and encoding processes as well as in the transference of material from one linguistic and cultural context to another. It becomes clear, then, that good writing skills in one's native language are a necessary prerequisite for successful translations, and that fact must be recognized in any translator-training program.

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Handout for
"How Can You Translate if You
Can't Express Yourself in Writing?"

AATSP, 1992

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Quotes 1-3 in Spanish are from Paloma Díaz-Mas, Los sefardíes: historia, lengua y cultura (Barcelona: Riopiedras Ediciones, 1986), as updated by the author for translation into English. The English translations are from Sephardim: The Jews from Spain (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992). Quote 4 is from El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha by Miguel de Cervantes, taken from Cervantes, Obras completas (Madrid: Aguilar, 1956), p. 1037. The corresponding English is from The Adventures of Don Quixote, trans. J.M. Cohen (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1950), p. 31.

1. (pp. 20-21--Chap. I)

Mas paralelamente a esta convivencia e intercambio entre las clases intelectuales, en la legislación de la época aparecen rasgos que no tienen nada de projudíos, junto a otros que reflejan la tradicional protección de la monarquía a este grupo: en las Siete Partidas se insiste en que los judíos "vienen del linaje de aquellos que crucificaron a Nuestro Señor Jesucristo" y se les impone la obligación de vivir en lugar aparte y llevar una señal distintiva en la ropa; pero al mismo tiempo se obliga a los cristianos a respetar la sinagoga, alegando que es "casa do se loa el nombre de Dios". El Fuero Real y sucesivas cortes celebradas a lo largo del siglo dieron una de cal y otra de arena: se prohibían los matrimonios mixtos y la

Coincident with this coexistence and exchange among the intellectual classes, legislation began to show some characteristics not at all favorable to the Jews, along with others which reflected the monarchy's traditional protection of this group. The Siete Partidas[1] insist, for example, that the Jews "descend from those who crucified Our Lord Jesus Christ" and require them to live apart from Christians and wear a distinctive sign on their clothing. Yet at the same time the Christians were obliged to respect the synagogue, because it was a "house in which the name of God is praised." The Fuero Real[2] and legislative sessions which took place during the thirteenth century gave with one hand and took away with the other. Jews and Christians were prohibited from marrying each other or even living under the

[1]A compilation of laws and customs of Castile, written under the direction of Alfonso X 'the Wise' (1252-1284), reflecting the Spanish society of the time.

[2]Law code which Alfonso X ordered compiled in 1254.

convivencia de judíos y cristianos bajo el mismo techo, pero se autorizaba a los judíos terratenientes a tener labradores cristianos; se prohibía el bautismo forzado, pero la conversión al judaísmo se castigaba con la muerte.

same roof, but Jewish landowners were permitted to employ Christian laborers; forced baptism was forbidden, but conversion to Judaism drew the death penalty.

2. (p. 59--Chap. II)

De ahí que, al arribar al imperio otomano, los sefardíes pudieran mantener una organización comunitaria y unas instituciones heredadas de las que habían existido en la península: siguieron teniendo sus propios tribunales rabínicos para resolver los asuntos legales internos de cada comunidad; la vida de éstas se regía por las ordenanzas rabínicas (haskamot); y ellos mismos elegían sus representantes ante los poderes públicos. Además, la falta de unificación cultural les permitió mantener los usos derivados de su religión, su lengua española y el alfabeto hebraico.

When they reached the Ottoman Empire, the Sephardim were thus able to retain community organization and institutions which they had brought from Spain. They continued to use their own rabbinical tribunals to resolve internal legal matters within each community. Community life was ruled by rabbinical orders (haskamot), and the Sephardim themselves elected their representatives to the government. Cultural hegemony within the Ottoman Empire also allowed them to continue the folkways derived from their religion, their Spanish language and the use of the Hebrew alphabet.

3. (p. 61--Chap. II)

Del poder de esta familia puede dar una idea el hecho de que fuese capaz de promover el boicot comercial contra el puerto italiano de Ancona, como represalia por las persecuciones de que eran objeto los conversos, y consiguiera además que el propio sultán Solimán el Magnífico intercediese a favor de unos correligionarios encarcelados en esa misma ciudad.

To illustrate this family's power, consider that it was able to cause the commercial boycott against the Italian port of Ancona in reprisal for its persecution of converts, and even succeeded in having the sultan Suleiman the Magnificent intercede in favor of some coreligionists who were jailed in that same city.

4. (Don Quijote--start of the opening paragraph)

En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme, no ha mucho tiempo que vivía un hidalgo de los de

In a certain village in La Mancha, which I do not wish to name, there lived not long ago a gentleman--one of those who have

lanza en astillero, adarga antigua, rocín flaco y galgo corredor. Una olla de algo más vaca que carnero, salpicón las más noches, duelos y quebrantos los sábados, lentejas los viernes, algún palomino de añadidura los domingos, consumían las tres partes de su hacienda. El resto de ella concluían sayo de velarte, calzas de velludo para las fiestas, con sus pantuflos de lo mismo, y los días de entre semana se honraba con su vellorí de lo más fino. Tenía en su casa una ama que pasaba de los cuarenta, y una sobrina que no llegaba a los veinte, y un mozo de campo y plaza, que así ensillaba el rocín como tomaba la podadera. (Paragraph continues, describing Don Quixote's age.)

always a lance in the rack, an ancient shield, a lean hack and a greyhound for coursing. His habitual diet consisted of a stew, more beef than mutton, of hash most nights, boiled bones on Saturdays, lentils on Fridays, and a young pigeon as a Sunday treat; and on this he spent three-quarters of his income. The rest of it went on a fine cloth doublet, velvet breeches and slippers for holidays, and a homespun suit of the best in which he decked himself on weekdays. His household consisted of a housekeeper of rather more than forty, a niece not yet twenty, and a lad for the field and market, who saddled his horse and wielded the pruning-hook. (Paragraph ends here; Don Quixote's age is discussed in a new paragraph.)